



2017

Mormons in the Piazza: History of the Latter-day Saints in Italy

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Recommended Citation

Properzi, Mauro (2017) "Mormons in the Piazza: History of the Latter-day Saints in Italy," *BYU Studies Quarterly*: Vol. 56 : Iss. 2 , Article 13.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol56/iss2/13>

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James A. Toronto, Eric R. Dursteler, and Michael W. Homer.
Mormons in the Piazza: History of the Latter-day Saints in Italy.

Provo, Utah: Religious Studies Center; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2017.

Reviewed by Mauro Properzi

Every so often, the publication of a book functions as a milestone in a particular area of study. The book is recognized either as the first, most comprehensive, or most distinctive treatment of a subject, with which all later researchers will need to familiarize themselves in order to be considered credible. When it comes to the history of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Italy, *Mormons in the Piazza* is such a book, and for all three of these reasons. James Toronto, BYU professor of Arabic and Islamic Studies; Eric Dursteler, BYU professor of history and chair of the same department; and Michael Homer, attorney, independent historian, and honorary Italian Consul in Salt Lake City, have produced a volume that is rigorously researched, beautifully written, and nicely illustrated. It is certainly a first in its area, since no comparable publication of this size is available in the English language. It is also the most comprehensive treatment on the presence of the LDS Church in Italy, ranging from the day the first missionary set foot on Italian soil to the recent announcement of the Rome temple's construction. Finally, it is distinctive in being both broadly accessible and academically solid, a combination that is difficult for any writer to achieve. It brings engaging historical narrative, cultural contextualization, and firsthand observation and analysis into one coherent picture that captures the reader's interest at both affective and intellectual levels.

The authors served LDS missions in Italy (Toronto also served a second time as president of the Catania mission) and are conversant in Italian, which allowed them to access and interpret the many archival, primary, and secondary sources in Italian that appear in the rich bibliography. Furthermore, their friendship or acquaintance with Church members and leaders likely facilitated opportunities for interviews, discussions, and the frank sharing of experiences that fill the later chapters

of the book. The narrative centers around places, people, and events that are familiar to those who have served missions in Italy, have lived in Italy as LDS members of the U.S. military, or are Italian Latter-day Saints. These groups will undoubtedly represent the bulk of the book's readership, but the volume's contribution to Mormon missiology at large is not to be underestimated. Toronto, Dursteler, and Homer raise questions, draw connections, and analyze patterns that will trigger attentiveness and reflections in those who do not necessarily share a direct interest in Italy, but whose focus may be the general history of the Church or LDS missionary work in a different area of the world. Indeed, the authors spend significant time examining the factors, both internal and external to the Church, that may facilitate or hinder growth in "the mission field." They also do not hesitate to highlight potential conflicts that emerge when American cultural expectations meet their foreign counterparts.

In about 600 pages, divided into fifteen chapters, the authors cover an impressive amount of historical terrain. The first four chapters explore what is often labeled "the first Italian mission," with missionary efforts centered on the Piedmont valleys inhabited by Protestant Waldensians. Initially led by Apostle Lorenzo Snow, the mission remained open for seventeen years through the service of twelve missionaries and resulted in the conversion of about 180 souls. The next chapter explores these converts' emigration to Utah and their contribution to the faith and industry of the new land, primarily in Weber County. Chapters 6 and 7 are dedicated to the interim period of almost one century when the Church was not officially present in Italy except for small branches of American LDS servicemen stationed in the country. The four chapters that follow turn their focus to the "second mission," which began with the rededication of the land by Elder Ezra Taft Benson and continued through increasing evangelization and public relation efforts, which eventually led to the creation of ten stakes, greater visibility in public life, the announcement of a temple, and the first Italian general authority. Chapters 12 and 13 break from the historical progression by offering an analysis that addresses possible reasons and factors that affect conversions to and disaffiliations from the Church among the Italians. Chapter 14, which describes the long and fascinating process that led to the official recognition of the Church by the Italian government, is followed by the authors' concluding reflections. An appendix with useful data on Church membership and historical growth in Italy wraps up the volume.

A book of this scope and quality is not prone to dissection for highlights, themes, or key arguments, since it contains so many. In briefly reviewing it, one can simply attempt to summarize its core message and generally examine its effectiveness in delivering it. In the final chapter, the authors explicitly articulate a broad conclusion of their extensive study. They claim that

the transformation of Mormonism from a marginalized spiritual movement into a major religion of global presence has resulted from a complex interplay of historical forces, political imperatives, socioeconomic conditions, intrinsic spiritual appeal, internal institutional tensions, capacity for redefinition and adaptation, and individual religious proclivities. This shifting constellation of factors must be taken into account if one wishes to understand the rise, expansion, and impact of the church and of new religious movements in general. (541)

At the micro level, their study highlights the interplay of cultural forces and ecclesiastical policies at the American core of Mormonism, along with similar factors in the Italian milieu. This dialectic shows “benefits and costs” as well as “challenges and opportunities” by pointing to “some of the reasons for individual conversion and overall growth in Italy. It also helps to explain the relatively slow pace of growth and the limited attraction of Mormonism among Italians” (541). In this context, the authors assess *real* Church growth as “a complex process that unfolds across a long trajectory of time and effort marked by fits and starts, advances and retreats, times of feast and famine, periods of expansion but also of stagnation and contraction, and even extinction” (542). The book is an exciting journey through the roller coaster of this very history.

As an Italian member of the Church who directly experienced a portion of this story, I have found the historical account and associated analysis to be both honest and insightful. As a scholar of Mormonism with an interest in ecclesiology and comparative religions, I am captivated by the perceptive sociocultural contextualization and analysis provided by the authors. As a general reader, I am simply happy to have read such a deeply entertaining book. Still, I would offer one criticism about the two chapters on the factors that led to the conversion and disaffiliation of Church members in Italy. Here the authors quote the perspectives of several Italian Latter-day Saints who are neither identified nor consistently grouped in particular demographic categories. While the omission of names can be easily justified, information on the interviewees, such as regional provenance, number of years in the

Church, gender, and age group, could have provided some support to the authors' implied claim that these perspectives are representative of Italian members. From a socioscientific methodological perspective, without any information of this kind the possibility of sampling bias looms large. This is particularly true in the diversified regional realities of Italy where the cultural differences between north and south can naturally give rise to some variety in members' expectations and perceptions. This criticism notwithstanding, *Mormons in the Piazza* is a foundational scholarly work of Mormon missiology and Church history alike, as well as a beautiful story of faith, sacrifice, and growth to be told and retold for years to come.

Mauro Properzi holds a PhD in Mormon Studies from Durham University in the U.K., a Master's of Theological Studies from Harvard Divinity School, an M.Phil in Psychology and Religion from Cambridge University, and a BS in Social Work from Brigham Young University. He also received a postdoctoral certificate in interfaith dialogue from the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, Italy. A native of Gorizia, Italy, Properzi is Assistant Professor of Religion at Brigham Young University, where he teaches classes on world religions and Christianity. His research interests focus on the theological and historical interface of Mormonism and Catholicism, the theology of religions, and religion and emotions. He has published in the *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, the *Religious Educator*, the *Journal of Mormon History*, *Brigham Young University Studies*, the *International Journal of Religion and Spirituality in Society*, and in *Issues in Religion and Psychotherapy*. His first monograph, *Mormonism and the Emotions: An Analysis of LDS Scriptural Texts*, was published in May 2015 by Fairleigh Dickinson University Press.